

Public Outreach and Stakeholder Involvement for King County's Combined Sewer Overflow Water Quality Assessment

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Introduction

Public outreach and stakeholder involvement are critical to the success of most projects. This paper shares some of the outreach approaches used as part of King County's Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO) Water Quality Assessment (WQA) for the Duwamish River and Elliott Bay. Hopefully, this information will assist other organizations in establishing public outreach and stakeholder involvement for their own watershed projects and programs.

Project Background

The Duwamish River and Elliott Bay form a complex estuary that has changed significantly since the mid-1800s due to human activities. The waterbodies support often incompatible uses of commercial, industrial, and residential development, as well as numerous point and non-point pollutant discharge sources. In addition, the Duwamish River contains a fluctuating salt/fresh water wedge, which adds additional challenges to modeling the estuary.

The purpose of King County's undertaking of a water quality assessment in this estuary is two-fold: to determine existing conditions in the water bodies through sampling, monitoring, and computer modeling of the water column and sediments; and to understand the relative significance of CSO pollutants compared to other pollutant sources by studying CSO impacts on human health and aquatic life through a risk assessment. The results of this assessment will help in prioritizing King County CSO projects, possibly extending or decreasing the CSO program's timeline in completing projects, and revising the program to look at other issues such as sediment remediation. In addition, the results may assist in the development of a watershed management strategy, could lead to changes in Washington State's CSO legal requirements, and may provide a framework by which other agencies can develop water quality and risk assessments in their own jurisdictions.

Public Outreach and Stakeholder Involvement

Public outreach and stakeholder involvement involves gaining public support (or at least avoiding antagonism) for your project. How do you successfully obtain support for your project? Through the following means:

- Marketing,
- Education,
- Involvement, and
- Communication.

The above items are not completely independent processes, but instead they overlap. For example, a brochure can be both a marketing tool and an educational tool. Each of these items also requires internal and external coordination.

Marketing

Marketing is a word and action that tends to be avoided by government agencies—and yet in the world of today, marketing is a pivotal tool for garnering interest for your project. Marketing has to occur before the next steps of educating, informing, and asking for input can take place. For many projects, you may find that there is a large overlap between marketing and education. This is particularly true of government projects where you need internal and external support for your project, but external support may not be actual “direct” payment for the service or information you are providing.

In terms of King County’s projects, the marketing techniques we found useful included:

- Logos and/or slogans,
- Information materials,
- Surveys,
- Presentations, and
- Media involvement.

Logos and Slogans

A logo and/or slogan developed for a project will ensure immediate project recognition as well as provide consistency across all project documents. They can also be used as part of your letterhead, on brochures, covers of documents, etc. Just as in marketing products, logos and slogans provide instant project recognition on both conscious and unconscious levels. King County’s Department of Natural Resources (DNR) continues to use the highly successful, “Clean Water—A Sound Investment.” This verbal play acknowledges Puget Sound as one of the major water bodies under DNR protection as well as the idea that protecting water quality makes sense (cents!).

Information Materials

To help people learn about your project, develop materials that both introduce people to the project and also educate them on the goals and expected results of the project. Fact sheets and brochures are a great means to “get the word out on your project” and can be easily handed out or mailed to people. Colorful graphics attract attention, but should not be too slick. The use of recycled paper enhances DNR’s goal to clean up our environment.

Surveys

For the CSO WQA, King County conducted a survey both to market and to introduce people to our project; to obtain specific information from a larger group as input to our project; to build a mailing list of people and organizations interested in the project; and to aid in the development of a stakeholder group. The survey also helped to focus our mailings to people who would be interested. If at all possible, conduct a survey that is statistically valid. This is more expensive and time-consuming, but adds a greater level of validity to your data.

Presentations

Presenting papers at meetings and conferences is a great way to gain recognition for your project. This type of recognition tends to also help you gain future funding and support from supervisors, managers, and staff within your agency and from other agencies. This is particularly important if you expect to have “spin off” studies and projects which need policy and budgetary support.

Media Involvement

Getting positive press on your project, on television and in newspapers can be very helpful. For the CSO WQA, we undertook a dye study of the Duwamish River to obtain a better understanding of how discharges mix with the river currents. This was covered by three news stations and by at least one local newspaper. This is the type of marketing that managers particularly like because it reaches the greatest number of people.

Education

Once people know about your project, you may want people to have a better understanding of why you are doing the project and what the project entails. Education tools include:

- Web sites,
- Newsletters, and
- Events.

Web Sites

Now that we have entered the age of the Internet, development of a web site can reach a different audience. Once the site is developed, it can be fairly easy to update. A web site also supports the marketing of your project. The same information you use to update your web site can be sent in the form of short articles to community newspapers (or vice versa).

Newsletters

To educate people and keep them updated on your project, a monthly or quarterly newsletter is also helpful. These same newsletters can be handed out along with brochures at community meetings, open houses, and other forums in which you are giving a presentation.

Events

Most of the time, open houses, community meetings, and other types of meetings are used as forums to educate the public. Besides these types of events, also try to develop events that people can actively participate in as part of your project (e.g., tree plantings). For the CSO WQA, we conducted boat tours of our study area for our stakeholder group. These tours gave people a better understanding of the complexity involved in the project and allowed for a more interactive and fun forum to share information and thoughts on the project.

Involvement

Some projects stop at the marketing and education stages. However, more projects are finding it necessary and extremely helpful to more actively involve the public and special groups. Involvement is one of the most difficult tasks of any organization. Some of the external challenges that organizations find it very difficult to overcome when trying to contact people include: busy lifestyles, a barrage of information on a daily basis, lack of trust for the organization, and the difficulty of developing “sound bites” of information on very complex issues. There are also internal institutional barriers as well. For example, “Do you really want to hear and can you act on information that may have not been scoped in your project timelines and budgets?!”

As discussed by David A. Julian, et al., in “Citizen Participation—Lessons from a Local United Way Planning Process,” many times citizen participation is defined as *any* effort to collect input from citizens. But at the same time, citizens are not truly given the power to influence decisions. This leads to a situation in which citizen participation in decision-making is based on consultation and not on genuine power to influence. Thus, in developing your public outreach plan, be clear in terms of what you can and want to do: consultation or direct participation. These are not mutually exclusive and may overlap.

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However, do not ask for or imply you want direct participation if you only want consultation. This can cause anger and create a situation where people feel their input is tokenism and therefore their commitment is meaningless. **For the most part, commitment and trust only exists when people feel they can achieve something through the process.**

For involvement, King County used two approaches:

- Consultation, and
- Direct Participation.

Consultation

This type of involvement can be very helpful and includes the more general feedback (e.g., opinions, questions) received at public, community, and more general meetings or through phone or written surveys. Information from this form of participation helps you gauge how successful you are at communicating your message, rather than making any substantial changes to the information your message is based upon. Consultation can help with the “spin” you desire your information to take. For the CSO WQA, consultation will take place after the study is completed and results are documented in an easily accessible format.

Direct Participation

With direct participation, you must be willing to make changes to your project based on feedback from participants. If accepted and used, direct feedback from an informed and committed group of individuals who are actively following the progress of the project can be extremely helpful. For the CSO WQA, we developed two groups to help the project: a peer review panel and a stakeholder committee. **For each group, it was important to define roles and expectations of the members very early in the process. It was also important to indicate when and how their specific input was needed within the overall schedule of the project.**

Peer-Review Panel

The Peer-Review Panel for the CSO WQA consists of members of the Water Environment Research Foundation. This panel included national experts in risk assessment, modeling, toxicology, and wet weather issues. The role of this committee is to provide input on the development of the risk-assessment plan, to review sampling data, to advise King County staff regarding potential problems and improvements that could be made to the project, and to provide input on how other jurisdictions nationwide are handling their own assessments. The Panel also provides additional oversight and information to the project as well as an evaluation of the overall project once it is completed. Peer Review Panel input is mainly received via phone calls, e-mails, and comments received on documents. Their input proved to be helpful in refining many aspects of the project. For the CSO WQA, Peer-Review-Panel input will be included in a separate Peer-Review Panel Report.

If possible, it is helpful to have at least one meeting where stakeholders and peer review panel members are able meet each other face to face. The Peer Review Panel adds a level of objectivity to your project that may render your project more valid in the eyes of the public and the stakeholder committee.

Stakeholder Committee

The Stakeholder Committee was developed based on responses to a survey, specific interests that King County staff knew existed within the study area, as well as recommendations from the other stakeholders. The final group consisted of representatives from businesses, community councils, environmental groups, tribes, and other government agencies.¹ The diversity of the group in terms of interests, background, and technical expertise was a major strength. The committee's major roles

include providing input on the design of research activities and the development of the risk assessment portion of the project as well as making recommendations to King County on several major policy issues based on the results of the study. Because of the wide diversity of knowledge and opinions, this group has been very helpful in refining the project. In addition, members of the stakeholder committee would question each other's opinions, which proved to be helpful in situations where it was awkward for the County to refute certain information. This group was also developed to help us disseminate information to a wider audience (the groups they represent) than we ourselves could do on a regular basis. More technically inclined members of the stakeholder committee also formed a Technical Subcommittee and greatly helped staff resolve specific technical details related to the project.

For the CSO WQA, we had several full-day workshops and offered additional working sessions in which we shared recent information more informally. We also kept the stakeholders updated by mailing draft and final copies of reports, meeting minutes, and other materials.

When directly involving people:

- Keep them frequently informed,
- Remind them of upcoming meetings and workshops,
- Keep them interested and happy, and
- Formally recognize their contributions.

Frequently Inform Committee Members

Between formal meetings, there is a lot of work that is undertaken on projects. Keep people frequently informed through newsletters, meeting minutes, and informal working sessions. By keeping people in the loop throughout the process in addition to major meetings, people will have a better understanding and higher level of commitment towards your project. In addition, at the end of the project people will be more prepared to make recommendations and support the methodology and results of your project as they *trust the work and the people involved in the project*.

Remind Members of Upcoming Meetings and Workshops

Meetings should be set up far in advance, as people's calendars fill quickly. Also, phoning and e-mailing people one to five days before the actual meeting takes place to remind them of the date and time increases meeting attendance.

Keep Members Interested and Happy

When conducting meetings, develop the agenda so that there is room for discussion (not only presentation) of the information presented. Try to respond less in defending your project and engage more in active listening and recording of people's comments and issues. Be sure to develop questions that allow people to directly share their expertise and give something to the project. In addition, information should be mailed out for review for meetings at least two weeks before the meeting, so that they can participate more actively in meetings. Overall, the more active the participation from the committee members (versus passive listening of presented information), the happier, more interested, and committed the members will be to the project.

Also, find fun ways to involve committee members such as field trips of your project area with a team member sharing specific information on the project on site. For the CSO WQA, we arranged boat tours of the estuary, which proved to be fun and educational.

You will know your stakeholder process has been successful if:

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- A variety of interests are represented on the committee.
- The members share information with their groups.
- Committee members attend meetings and actively comment on processes and products.
- Members actively discuss issues and share differences of opinion.
- Members support the project in other ways².
- Members are willing to support “spin-off” projects.

Formally Recognize Members' Contributions

The more members feel that their contributions are incorporated into the project, the more committed and supportive the members will be of the project. Recognition includes: follow-up letters after formal meetings responding to how members comments are being addressed within the project, notations within meeting minutes responding to members comments, and addressing issues through e-mail and phone conversations.

In addition, to ensure that stakeholders contributions are formally noted in the process and by decision-makers, hire consultants to work with stakeholders in developing a stakeholders recommendations report. This report can include majority and minority opinions.

At the close of the project or if your project has a major meeting around a major holiday (e.g., Christmas or the New Year), with approval of your organization, be sure to give something to your committee members as a thank you gift. Gifts can include T-shirts and mugs printed with your project's logo and slogan or a certificate of appreciation. These gifts also keep stakeholders aware of your project outside of specific meetings.

Communication

Communication is the underlying component of all the previous items. Graphic and verbal communication are just as important as written communication. Gestures, body language, and tone of voice may be the most important aspects of communicating. For example, 93% of what we communicate to people is unspoken (7% is words; 38% is tone; 55% is gesture/body language).³

Verbal Communication

When conducting workshops and meetings, be sure to have a person who has strong facilitation skills leading the session. These skills include the ability to: limit people who talk too long or who digress from the topic, get people to speak who remain silent, gauge when it is time to move to the next topic, and to calmly and effectively deflate disrupters.

Also include a person who records comments and issues on flip charts as well as someone taking notes. This ensures that staff is actually taking in what people are sharing. Review the notes after the session and follow-up by phone or letter with committee members or the public in terms of how the issue is being addressed. Responding to comments goes a long way in developing trust.

When responding to issues raised with high emotions, respond with respect and empathy. Avoid defensiveness or trying to prove the person wrong by spouting additional technical data. The person rarely moves from their stance with this type of response. Your main goal should be to diffuse the anger, fear, and outrage. This can be done by keeping a relaxed body and empathetic facial expression. Use expressions such as “This sounds very important to you,” “Thanks for sharing your thoughts and feelings,” and “That sounds like a difficult situation.” *Always respond with sincerity and avoid technical and unsympathetic responses.*

Graphic Communication

Graphic material can greatly aid in presenting very complex technical or detailed information. For example, after the CSO WQA second workshop there was a high level of committee confusion regarding roles, responsibilities, and when input would be expected within the project's timeframe. This confusion was eliminated at the third workshop after we developed a wall- and handout-sized graphic timeline. PowerPoint has also been helpful in developing presentation materials (e.g., overheads, slides, or for using your computer for the presentation). It also helps to save time as handouts are created at the same time as presentation materials.

When developing colored graphics, ensure that they will work as black and white versions as well. This allows handouts to be more legible and cost-effective to produce.

Conclusion

Public outreach and stakeholder involvement continues to be one of the most challenging aspects of many projects. It is important to use marketing, education, involvement, and communication techniques in a pro-active and sensitive manner. The positive recognition you achieve for your project, the trust you build with the public and other organizations, or at the very least the ability to get your project implemented with fewer delays, will more than make up for the time and expense involved in undertaking public outreach and stakeholder involvement.

References

- Julian, D. A., et al. 1997. Citizen Participation—Lessons from a Local United Way Planning Process. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Vol. 63, No. 3, pp. 345–355.
- Pacific Northwest Conference for Women Opening Session. Seattle, WA. Held on September 30, 1997.
- Sandman, P. 1994. Quantitative Risk Communication: Explaining the Data. Peter M. Sandman. Newton Centre, MA. Videotape.

¹ One of the challenges of the Stakeholder Committee was that it remained in a certain level of flux. Not all members could make all meetings or some of the major meetings, some left and were replaced during the project's schedule, and some stakeholders sent substitutes if they could not attend a meeting or if the stakeholder wanted to send someone with more expertise or interest on particular topics.

² Several members in our stakeholder group supported the project in other ways. For example, some shared additional studies that might be of interest to staff and some lent their services; one stakeholder and his colleagues at the National Marine Fisheries Service analyzed bile from English sole collected jointly by King County and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. This information will be used by the three organizations in an attempt to predict bioeffects from exposures to PAHs in the water bodies in the CSO WQA study area.

³ Information presented at the opening session presentation at the Pacific Northwest Conference for Women in Seattle, WA on September 30, 1997.